



For Parents of young children

Setting the Stage for Discipline

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Disciplining means teaching a child the rules people live by and directing him so he will adopt these rules of his own accord. Guiding them toward self-discipline is a goal you should keep in mind in the daily handling of your children.

Discipline and punishment are not the same thing. The purpose of punishment is to prevent your child from repeating a forbidden act—to teach him what is wrong. The purpose of discipline is to direct your child in choosing constructive behavior patterns and in developing self-control and self-discipline.

Discipline Implies a Constructive Viewpoint

The way you feel when you discipline your children has a great effect on their reactions. For example, if you approach a behavior situation feeling cross, angry, and upset, your child probably will react in the same way. But if you are firm without being angry, the effect will be quite different.

Let's examine several ways you can set the stage for discipline.

Suggest in a Positive Way

"Bounce the ball on the floor," is a positive suggestion. It tells your child what to do. "Don't hit the window" is a negative one. It only tells him what *not* to do. Likewise, "Carry the glass of milk slowly" is a better way of saying, "Don't spill the milk." In other words, telling your child what he should be doing is better than dwelling on what he shouldn't do.

It's very easy to let the words "Stop" and "Don't" slip out when you have to stop your child from doing something. It takes effort to replace those negatives with positive statements. But your child

will be less resistant if you make your suggestions positively, and you'll feel better about disciplining him too. Save "Don't" and "Stop" for those emergencies when you *must* put a quick stop to what he is doing.

Let Your Tone of Voice Do Part of the Job

Certainly parents have plenty of cause for shouting at times, and who's to say it isn't a great release. But as a regular technique in disciplining children, shouting is not effective.

When are your children most apt to listen to you? Is it when you speak loud and fast or is it when you slow down and speak in a quiet, pleasant voice? If you speak in a loud tone of voice continually, your child probably will have to raise his voice to match yours.

It's better not to shout at little children from one room to another. When they play, children often concentrate so completely on what they are doing that they are aware of nothing else. So move close and speak directly to them—you will be more apt to gain their attention.

Speaking quietly not only is more effective in disciplining children, it helps you stay calm too.

Choose Words That Build Confidence

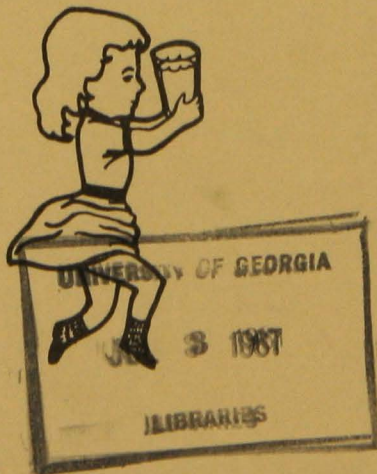
Even though you must show disapproval when your child is misbehaving you can do it in a constructive way. You may feel like saying, "You naughty girl," or, "You bad, bad boy." But such expressions belittle a child; they may make him feel guilty or lose confidence in himself. It's better to show disapproval of what your child is doing than to show disapproval of your child himself. To say, "Jimmy, keep your food on your plate," helps Jimmy more than "You naughty child—to make all that work for Mother."

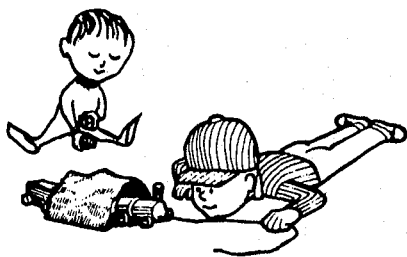
Such an expression as "Mother won't love you" threatens your child with the loss of your love, and that may be more than he can bear. Contrary to the way it may seem, small children prefer to do what their parents expect of them and behave better when they sense love and approval. If through your disciplining you can say, "I don't like what you did, but I still like you," you'll be on the right track.

Keep Your Suggestions and Directions at a Minimum

Little children talk alot. Though your child needs to be talked to, you need not fall into the habit of responding to everything he says. You may be talking so much that your child will become accustomed to it and will ignore what you say. Family sociologists sometimes refer to this problem as "mother-deafness."

Also, if you respond to everything he says, your child may start demanding too much of you. He must learn that there are times when you have to give your complete attention to meal planning or to a caller and that there are times when you want a few moments just to sit and think. Teaching your child modera-





tion in talking will help him learn to respect such times.

Offering too many suggestions to children can prevent them from using their own ideas. And making a suggestion before a child needs help deprives him of the chance to work out his own problem and may upset his play. Occasionally however, you may have to back up your words with action. So, if telling Jimmy that it is time to wash his hands brings no response, take his hand and lead him to the bathroom.

Redirect Undesirable Behavior

Two-year-old Timmy, who is mauling the kitten, objects violently when you take it away from him. Substituting a toy one may satisfy his desire to handle and play with the kitten.

Timmy and Linda are beginning to throw toys in the living room. Perhaps what they need most is to put on their wraps and play outside.

You sometimes may be able to avoid the need to discipline your child by substituting a desirable activity for an undesirable one. But what you substitute must meet your child's need. Giving him a storybook when he is tired of sitting still will not help; neither will sending him outside when he is already physically tired.

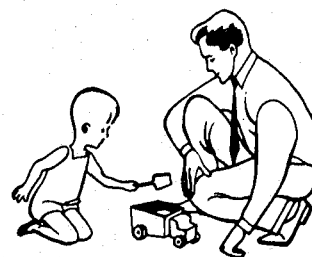
Set Limits

You may be able to avoid some discipline problems by setting limits that your children can understand. However, setting limits with small children can upset a most enjoyable parent-child relationship, so you should use careful judgment when you impose them. Take into account your child's age and his stage of development. Naturally, you cannot expect a 2-year-old child to understand or accept the same limits as a 5-year-old.

A good rule is to set only necessary limits. They include limits to:

- ◇ protect your child's health.
- ◇ protect your child's safety.
- ◇ protect the rights of others.
- ◇ protect and support your child against his own strong feelings.

Every child faces restrictions in his home and surroundings that interfere somewhat with his need for activity and learning. But if a child has too many restrictions, he may feel completely boxed in. He may become less spontaneous and creative than you'd like him to be. Imposing too many restrictions too early in childhood may cause resentment and necessitate constant interference. Instead of accepting rules as a part of self-discipline, your child may only wish for the day when he doesn't have to follow rules.



Employing positive means when disciplining your child may be the best way to set the stage for his own self-discipline.

References

- Spock, Benjamin A. *Dr. Spock Talks With Mothers*. Crest Books. 1964. Section III, "Discipline and Companionship." (60¢)
- Public Affairs Pamphlets. (For copies, write to: 381 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016.) (25¢ each)
- Archer, Jules, and Dixie Leppert Yahraes. *What Should Parents Expect from Children*. PAP 357.
- Baruch, Dorothy. *How to Discipline Your Children*. PAP 154.
- Neisser, Edith G. *Your Child's Sense of Responsibility*. PAP 254.
- Polier, Justine Wise. *Back to What Woodshed?* PAP 232.

Do you have questions about your children that you'd like answered in this newsletter? Are there topics you'd particularly like to see discussed in it?

Please address your questions and suggestions to your county home agent and she will transfer them to the editor.

Parents Newsletter Committee: Sue Fisher, chairman; Ron Pitzer; Dorothea Riemann; and Donald Bender.

Mention of commercial names does not imply endorsement nor does omission imply criticism.

Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Luther J. Pickrel, Director, Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101. 25M-5-67